

## Camp, Self-aware Kitsch, Trash, and the Politics of Irony

I want to explore three concepts--mass culture, subculture, and irony--through several perspectives. First, I consider camp as an attitude or sensibility closely linked to gay male subculture which provides an impetus for subtextual reading. Next, using a commercial boardroom and bedroom film, **The Betsy**, for elaboration, I discuss how an ironic stand to mass culture similar to that found in camp is present in a trend I call self-aware kitsch. Then a further specification of camp emerges from examining trash, a variety of intentional camp which celebrates casual excess through a deliberately crude and offensive content. Films such as **Trash**, **Multiple Maniacs**, and **Thundercrack** highlight the need for a political critique of camp and a further analysis of irony as a strategy of subcultural resistance in contemporary media.

### Camp

Following Susan Sontag's provocative and original essay, "Notes on 'Camp'," we can recognize camp as a sensibility which sees the world in terms of aesthetization and style: "the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration."<sup>1</sup> Camp is an ironic appreciation of an extravagant form which is out of proportion to its content, especially when that content is banal or trivial. Sontag identifies pure

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<sup>1</sup>Sontag

camp as naive and unintentional, exhibiting a failed seriousness and/or an extravagant and passionate ambition.

A good example of failed seriousness would be the mid-50s independently produced film about male transvestism, **Glenn or Glenda** (aka **I Changed My Sex** fc), which found some success when rereleased on the midnight show and college film club circuit and offbeat video market where it is appreciated for its amazingly defensive fetishism. The defense of the fantasy is so strong (a voice over narrator tells us everything we are seeing) and so mundane (the rhetoric of democratic choice and privacy of the home is constantly invoked in the manner of instructional films on civic issues) and so particular (we are constantly reminded that male crossdressing has *absolutely nothing* to do with homosexuality), that it invites the same kind of hilarity as **Reefer Madness**.

[add more here about what is actually appreciated in this material--the technical and imaginative poverty of the piece throws it in a different light for anyone not devoted to its subject matter; compare with cheap gore a la Hershell Gordon Lewis]

Busby Berkeley provides the classic example of extravagant and passionate ambition contributing to camp appreciation because his musical numbers are aesthetically neurotic precisely in their highly regulated excess. The distinctive mark of most classic Hollywood film compared with much of world cinema is its unique combination of total innocence and absolute vulgarity at one and the same time. Consider one of Berkeley's dance sequences for Eleanor Powell in **Lady Be Good**: a duet with a fox terrier who ends up on top of the dancer's abdomen when she ends the

number by falling back in joyful, breathless laughter on a bed.<sup>2</sup> [fig] Hollywood film often exhibits a psycho-aesthetic pluralism. Films are deliberately constructed to be open to a great deal of very different fantasizing and that is one secret of mass appeal. In this context, what makes for camp appreciation is that often fantasy possibilities are simplified so much that they seem isolated and ridiculous. We need our defenses.

Sontag links camp and urban male homosexual culture in a rather loose way. Following Sontag, but making the connection more precise, Richard Dyer and Jack Babuscio have claimed camp sensibility as a core element of gay male subculture. As Dyer argues,

It is just about the only style, language and culture that is distinctively and unambiguously gay male. In a world drenched in straightness, all the images and the words of society express and confirm the rightness of heterosexuality. Camp is the one thing that expresses and confirms being a gay man.<sup>3</sup>

Babuscio elaborates the relationship in his key essay in the development of gay film criticism, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility." Arguing in more narrow terms than Sontag, he discusses camp as expressing a relation between something and the observer's gayness. The gay sensibility constitutes a different consciousness, "a heightened awareness of certain

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<sup>2</sup>Gaines

<sup>3</sup>Dyer

human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression."<sup>4</sup> He elaborates in terms of four basic features of camp: irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor. Camp irony is "any highly incongruous contrast between an individual or thing and its context or association. The most common of incongruous elements is that of masculine/feminine."<sup>5</sup> Aestheticism as part of camp emerges in a practical appreciation of "style as a means of self-projection, a conveyor of meaning and an expression of emotional tone."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, to take life as theatre, particularly in terms of sex role playing and passing for straight, is fundamental to both camp and gay consciousness. Camp humor is a strategy for reconciling conflicting emotions; it is "a means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining a positive identity." Significantly, Babuscio argues, camp humor relies on an involvement, strongly identifying with a situation or object while comically appreciating its contradictions. In this it is different from the detachment that simply involves mocking something.

Dyer and Babuscio are right in specifying camp as a gay male sensibility, but in making that case, they do not sufficiently recognize the broadening of camp. Sontag's 1964 essay draws many connections between camp and the art world. Since that time the media world (tv, radio, pop music, advertising, journalism, etc.) has tended to coopt camp, to absorb some aspects and neutralize/naturalize its subversive potential. There is a tendency for mass culture media to take up almost

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<sup>4</sup>Babuscio

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anything that is different and turn it to an aspect of fashionable change: something different to spice up jaded tastes. **Monty Python** on US public broadcasting and MTV provides a case in point. On public television in the 70s it found an avid audience in the college educated britcult strata, with its sophisticated joking about the norms of the BBC and other British bureaucracies, and wit about working class matrons visiting Jean-Paul Sartre. Yet in the 80s on MTV and Nickelodeon cable channels a younger, adolescent audience alienated from the blandness of mainstream tv watched it for its difference but without necessarily getting the intellectual allusions. With a humor often drawing on a long British musical hall tradition of cross dressing, and a frequent mocking of heterosexual behavior and norms, it could be read as strongly gay camp influenced, but it did not have to be read that way, and in this way it occupied a profitably ambiguous position.

If in its origins and purest forms, camp is part of a gay male sensibility, it is adaptable to heterosexual sensibility, as evidenced by many of Ken Russell's films. In their extravagant theatricality, love of artifice, extreme emotional range, they can be considered examples of het camp. more?

Babuscio's categories closely match a preadolescent and adolescent world in which, as a socially stigmatized group, young people share in a similar pattern of elements: irony as a way of dealing with the gap between fact and norm, behavior and rule; the theatricality of role-playing and role-testing; humor as defensive assertion; and style (especially clothing and

appearance) as the only permissible significant life choice.<sup>7</sup> Thus in the late 70s The **Rocky Horror Picture Show** as weekly event, or the Grand Guignol theatricality of teen horror films in the 80s such as the **Friday the 13th** series, the extravagant phallocentrism of Heavy Metal rock decorated with hyper femme touches. In this world, parody becomes a commodity form of irony with Mad magazine or the National Lampoon, many **Saturday Night Live** sketches, **SCTV**, etc. We end up with a "revolt" with only some parents (who have to live with it) find distressing and which only rightwing demagogues find dangerous. The point being that camp, like all subcultural resistance, constantly courts the absorption, commercialization, and neutralizing imitation of the modern culture industry.

The media world's cannibalization of subcultures is a structural feature of the culture industry. It is staffed by people who are predominantly petty bourgeois professionals and whose very occupation implies a distance from, an irony towards, the personalities, programs, and products they produce--a true dissociation of sensibility. Unable to believe in what they make, to have a naive acceptance of it, mass culture makers are often drawn to subcultures precisely for their difference, their newness, their not-yet-commercialized qualities. All of which, not so incidentally can be turned back into one's work. A weekend in the subculture inspires Monday morning's new ad campaign.

## Self-aware Kitsch

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<sup>7</sup>The internalization of social values doesn't change their presence.

Mass culture is often highly self-conscious of its own status in its presentation. I'll call this self-aware kitsch. At its broadest, kitsch can be taken as the popular commercial art of the modern era. Certainly this is how Clement Greenberg presented it in his well-known essay, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," written in the late 30s. [add germ origin of the word] For Greenberg, 20th century art divided into two parts: the artistic avant garde, which he favors, and kitsch, the mechanically reproduced "ersatz culture," which depends on formulaic patterns. In his words, it is the art of "vicarious experiences and fake sensations."<sup>8</sup> Other commentators have also used the term kitsch in an extremely judgemental way. Gillo Dorfles in an anthology he edited on the subject calls it "the world of bad taste," and Abraham Moles defines it as "the art of happiness." Of course a term so obviously subjective and class-biased (whose bad taste?) is virtually useless as a critical and analytic tool, but there is a sense in which kitsch can be used in a descriptive way, and that is when the text itself gives evidence the makers themselves were aware of their "bad taste."

Daniel Petrie's film, **The Betsy**, based on Harold Robbin's novel is a fine example of kitsch which is totally aware of itself as kitsch. As a film version of what John Cawelti has labelled the "best-seller social melodrama,"<sup>9</sup> the plot is familiar Harold Robbins' material--the scramble for power in the bedrooms and boardrooms of corporate America. [add here Jacqueline Suzanne, others of the form, generational family,

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<sup>8</sup>Greenberg

<sup>9</sup>Cawelti

historical romance] This time we have an old patriarch of a Detroit auto dynasty who dreams and schemes of producing for the end of the 20th century a car as successful and practical as the Model T and Volkswagen were for earlier generations. (It focuses on the success myth characteristic of work appealing to the broad mass audience, rather than the failure myth seen in work which is more appealing to the alienated petty bourgeoisie.) That the film is totally self-aware can be demonstrated by mentioning that the auto tycoon is played with great gusto by Sir Laurence Olivier in a broad midwestern accent and that we get to see his ass, in long shot, as he vigorously makes love to a maid upstairs during his son's wedding celebration. Casting against type of a rare order, indeed. And the lusty scene, in true melodramatic style, is secretly observed by the new daughter-in-law, which underlines the film's particular style of handling character. The characters don't *have* any psychological problems or interior life, the oedipal situation is totally externalized; they don't *have* any fantasies, they live them. The result is a kind of behaviorist rereading of the Tristan and Isolde myth—anticipation and reverie are truncated from passion, and guilt is subtracted from the love myth.

A remarkable literalness infuses the entire film. At its best this directness has a comic book simplicity as when Betsy, the granddaughter for whom the new car is to be named, goes for a naked swim. She is observed by the young hero, sees him watching and acknowledges his glance with a smile. The neurotic voyeurism or cloying sentimentality typical of such a shot sequence is avoided by her frankness. But more typically, the film's visual style simply trades in well worn clichés as in



lovmaking sequences which reproduced the lush coyness of Penthouse photography. Hollywood's old standby transtion device, the rapid montage compressing events through time, is updated with split screen and mutiple matted windows, well known to anyone who watches tv commercials. This very familiarity is reassuring. Petrie's use of the virtuouso long take with a moving camera is a far cry from its use by Renoir, Welles, Sirk, Jerry Lewis, Antonioni, or Godard. In Petrie's version, a 70 second shot that takes the daughter-in-law from bedroom door to the patriarch's bed, the camera pans and dollies to create different compositions as the woman approaches the bed, but this is a bland functionalism which ends in framing the pair in bed in long shot from the foot of the bed and then slowly dollyng and slowly zooming in to frame the faces in a simple signification of the sexual act, followed by a straight cut to a longshot of the tycoon in a sunny dining room the next morning at breakfast.

In a similar vein, literalness and functionalism combine in a recycled cliché when the patriarch's son, realizing that his wife is in bed with his father, commits suicide with a revolver while being watched by his young son. We see the gun pointed at the head from the child's point of view, then a reverse shot close up of the child's face and as the gun goes off a freeze frame of the child staring directly at the camera/audience-- recycling once again Truffaut's conclusion to **The 400 Blows**. Of course the boy runs to find his mother, and of course opens the door on his mother in his grandfather's arms. Could we ask for a more primal scene? Could be imagine that the film would be that obvious? But of course it is. And the whole sequence takes place during a rainstorm-- the pathetic fallacy in action. Cliches are not merely recycled in this

genre, they are made more literal. For example, in **The Other Side of Midnight**, faced with an unwanted pregnancy, the heroine performs a self-abortion using a wire coathanger. Watching the film, we are almost forced to ask ourselves, will they dare by that obvious? And of course they are, for the exaggeration, the heightening, the acceleration of cliches, underlines the situation, and the situation--the dramatic arrangement of characters and conflicts--forms the central fantasy of attraction of melodrama.

Films such as **The Betsy** and **The Other Side of Midnight** can be taken in a totally ironic way and be laughed at. It's especially easy for people with high culture tastes or backgrounds to do so, and for media people who can spot the formal cliches which underline the content conventions to do so. But these films function with the general mass audience in a different way: people are into the situation and into the exaggeration at the same time. Fans have usually read the book, and if not read it, have heard the plot in advance from conversations with family, friends, co-workers, or the print and tv journalism around media, the **Entertainment Tonight** type of show. The experience of such self-aware kitsch demands a certain kind of "willing suspension of disbelief."<sup>10</sup> Identification and enjoyment of the film's visual and narrative pleasures are present, to be sure, but taken in a somewhat distanced direction. As Molly Haskell explained the reception of **The Other Side of Midnight** to her **Village Voice** readers:

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<sup>10</sup>source as aesthetic concept, implication for mass culture.

...See the film at a Times Square theatre with that euphemism of demographics, the "Real People." That is to say, ethnics (another euphemism) and young white females, the '70s equivalent of "shopgirls." They boo and hiss and cheer and talk back to the screen, exulting or weeping over their favorite scenes....Perhaps it's time to admit that producer Frank Yablans knows something about the American public we don't know.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than "talking down" to the audience, the makers of self-aware kitsch are "talking across" to that audience. The implicit assumption is, "We all know this is fun, a good piece of entertainment." Sontag underlines the problem with this strategy in discussing

...the delicate relation between parody and self-parody in Camp. The films of Hitchcock are a showcase for this problem. When self-parody lacks ebullience but instead reveals (even sporadically) a contempt for one's themes and one's materials--as in **To Catch a Thief**, **Rear Window**, **North By Northwest**--the results are forced and heavy handed, rarely Camp. Successful Camp...even when it reveals self-parody, reeks of self-love.<sup>12</sup>

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OSM as end of the social melo film genre, highly ironic

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<sup>11</sup>Haskell

<sup>12</sup>Sontag

transfer of the form to tv: the mini series (Thorn Birds, etc)

transfer to serials (Dallas, Dynasty, etc.)

Feuer on dualness of reception

## Trash

Intentional camp is usually elegant and sophisticated and is sometimes called high camp (as opposed to unintentional or low camp), but this term can be confusing when we discuss trash, for trash is a type of intentional camp which relies on casual excess and libidinal obviousness for its effect. With trash a poorly done form (poorly done by conventional standards of technique) is pushed to the limits so that its very badness is what the art work is about. In other words, it is a celebration of bad taste and often coupled with a desire to offend both in form and content. In this it actively resists absorption into the dominant culture. While trash tries to be bad, at times it may transcend its offensiveness to make a statement about offensiveness. If the grandfather of high camp is Oscar Wilde, the grandfather of trash is Alfred Jarry, author of **Ubu Roi**.

Minimally, trash films embody the ethos of shocking mainstream middle class values. Flagrant transvestites will never fit middle America's self image. Thus by their very presence Holly Woodlawn in **Trash** (Paul Morrissey, 1970) and **Divine** in **Multiple Maniacs** (John Waters, 1970) offend by being consistent camp queens. They have the affrontery to define their own presentations: the actor not a woman but as actress. And soon or later, but inevitably, the audience is drawn to accept Holly

Woodlawn as something more than an extended joke on gender possibilities and to think of her seriously--not as a woman, but as a queen. That's the subversive part: not the initial surprize of gender confusion, but that eventually the audience is won to liking her. She's herself, always and without excuse. A twenty-four-hour-a-day actress. The style becomes the content.

Push the point further and you have early Divine: gross in body, gross in deed, entering into the realm where quantitative change becomes qualitative change and suddenly bad taste is celebrated as good taste. That's confusing, and it's supposed to be, for Holly and Divine interrupt the usual position of the actress. Consider Rouben Mamoulian's remarks on the conclusion of *Queen Christina*:

Garbo asked me: "What do I play in this scene?" Remember she is standing there for 150 feet of film--90 feet of them in close-up. I said: "have you heard of *tabula rasa*? I want your face to be a blank sheet of paper. I want the writing to be done by every member of the audience. I'd like it if you could avoid even blinking your eyes, so that you're nothing but a beautiful mask." So in fact there is nothing on her face: but everyone who has seen the film will tell you what she is thinking and feeling. And always it's something different.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Mamoulian

Classic and contemporary Hollywood cinema uses a broad style of manipulated realism to position the actress in the narrative and in the frame as a partial metaphor, as a figure to be completed, as a Rorschach card, as an object of sexual gaze. Using a different style that we might call sordid naturalism pushed to wittiness, **Trash** gives us Joe Dallesandro in that position. Passive in the face of everything and everyone, junkie Joe offers his hustler's body to any one and any use, as long as he can shoot up. He is a blank face set against the human Muzak of getting a blow job, listening to an endless monologue, being stuck with a quarrelling couple. Whatever others want him to be, he becomes. Joe is the ultimate human mask. Although positioned in the narrative and frame as woman, he doesn't satisfy because he is also positioned as junkie. Just as some fulfillment is promised, the film begins to reverse the interplay of visual and verbal sound tracks. We wait out the real time of Joe shooting up only to have the camera drift away, denying us Joe's communion with heroin by substituting the everyday and trivial. While Joe takes his dissociation of sensibility in his arm, we take it in our eyes and ears.

Arguing that the hustler and the transvestite are "linked for all their apparent difference by a common obsession with the mystery of how a man inhabits his flesh," Stephen Koch in his book on Warhol's films finds,

They are at opposite poles of a common dilemma. The transvestite on the one hand, builds upon the denial of his

Divine too fights back, but that campaign, initially begun by literally assaulting Middle America, accumulates its momentum in a different direction--towards excess for its own sake, towards Grand Guignol, towards the grotesque. But Divine never really arrives anywhere and ends up subverting the camp spirit itself. Rather than the ironic interplay of style against substance characteristic of camp, we have Divine simply assaulting all audience sensibilities from a unique and inexplicable position. Shock substitutes for clever form. Excess becomes its own excuse, and Divine's 400 pound excess stands as simply bizarre, representing nothing but itself, a non sequitar raised to an initial proposition. As a result the deliberate crudeness of the whole affair inhibits any immediacy in the audience's response. Divine is at her best when she goes berzerk after a mass murder, cannibalistic orgy, and being raped by a giant papier maché lobster. But actually this has little to do with Divine's persona or her acting. Mostly the film picks up at this point because the action moves fast enough to sustain interest. Most of the time the film never achieves the true trash goal of transcending its own offensiveness because the film stalls out again and again. At times Divine is disgusting only because she's dull, repetitive, uninteresting, not because of any genuine assault on anyone's sensibilities.

**Multiple Maniacs** underlines a problem for trash as an aesthetic strategy. Without some narrative development, rhythmic pacing, character interest, variation and surprise, it's difficult to sustain audience attention to trash over a feature length. This remains a problem in all of John Water's early work, though by the time he gets to

anatomical reality; the hustler, on the other, proclaims himself to be "just a body."<sup>14</sup>

But this observation, while certainly true in part, seems to say the least important thing about Holly Woodlawn in **Trash**. Gender identity and sexuality are the least of her problems as she tries to establish a household. Much more to the point is Holly as survivor, as lower East Side street person (played by Holly Woodlawn who was part of the Warhol Factory). The aspirations of this garbage picker who just wants to make a nice home, raise a kid, attain the security of being on welfare, are simple and just. As her sleazy subculture soap opera unfolds in the second half of the film, the film invites us to approve of her selfconscious struggle for a better life, for security, for a decent income. And because her cause is just, our own emotions, well-trained by old melodramas, override having a simply comic time when Holly faces a welfare office toad. It's funny and clever to see Holly with padded tummy putting on a bureaucrat, but we also become annoyed when he tries to blackmail her and we cheer when she insists on her rights and self-respect.

We have another repositioning. Joe is initially positioned as woman and then repositioned as junkie—we can have his body, but not his mind. At first Holly is situated in the film as sacrificing woman, but then she is repositioned as a politically exemplary welfare mother fighting back as best she can.

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<sup>14</sup>Koch



work with a sufficient budget for high production values, with **Polyester** and **Hairspray**, he decisively overcomes those problems. And not so ironically, his ongoing national reputation in film circles and successful public persona allowed Waters to become an artistic favorite son, in his hometown of Baltimore. Divine also grew artistically, and became a much stronger comic actress as well as a club performer. So celebrity overcame notoriety, and financial success finally validated the early work which was explicitly intended to shock and outrage the local establishment.

**Thundercrack** (Curt McDowell, 1975) is a hard core porn film with scenes of explicit sexual activity done in a trash style that undercuts most of the usual responses people have to porn. For example, the basically silly visual appearance of male masturbation by machine is not calculated to turn on very many porn viewers, and a blow job punctuated by a singularly banal discussion is intentionally anti-climactic. McDowell and writer George Kuchar are the perfect collaborative pair for this camp pastiche of cinematic conventions. With a stock-in-trade of vulgarity of gargantuan proportions, here they have the freedom to push their excesses to the epic length of two and one-half hours. While the basic story is simple enough--the old chestnut that brings together a group of strangers who must then relate to each other and some outside danger (**Stagecoach**, **Night of the Living Dead**, **Dirty Dozen**)--the main interest lies in the constantly changing burlesques and travesties of cultural conventions from the cinematic and real worlds. Thus the actor's set piece Recital of a Gruesome Incident becomes the bizarre story of how a woman burned her girdle at a garden party to demonstrate her

freedom only to be burned by the lethal chemistry of the garment. First horrified, the guests finally accidentally join in the immolation when the alcohol in their drinks feeds the fire instead of putting it out. The victim becomes a martyr for the women's movement and the inspiration for a terrorist attack on the House of Philips girdle company which exhibits a typical capitalist disregard for human life by making the incendiary underwear.

The film continues in this vein, mixing shaggy dog stories, grand Guignol, the clichés of cheap magazine fiction, nonsequitars, parodies of reborn Christians, moments of soap opera drama, and hard core pornography. There is just enough satire to construct a plausible case for redeeming social value as in the send up of Buckminster Fuller devotees: "Here on Spaceship Earth there are no scum, just malfunctioning circuits." But any sustained attempt to justify the film on such grounds is going to run into the problem of the film's relentless absurdity. Can we take anything in it seriously? I think the film does provide one anchoring reference point in the last sexual escapade. Justifying giving in to sexual blackmail, one character explains, "No greater love can a man show for a woman than to give his body to the enemy." This is the verbal defense of the one sex scene which is presented straight (well it is a gay love scene, but without mocking). The intercourse between two men is filmed and presented as ordinary porn with an emotionally synchronized soundtrack (drum and flute) and routine climax. This scene, as opposed to all the other sexual encounters, is privileged: it intends to be erotic. In this way the film actually does get beyond the running gags on impotence, masturbation, voyeurism, enemas, incest and interspecies sex

(in Kuchar's long monologue about his ill-fated love affair with a homicidal female gorilla). The women in the film are not women but drag queens who happen to have the biological definition of female. In one sense, then, the film is an extended gay male mocking of heterosexuality: physically, when one man begins fucking an inflatable female doll; verbally, when the characters abuse the men for impotence when faced with an open invitation to heterosexual pleasure. In this sense the whole film is a double entendre and it can only be fully understood within the context of gay male subculture.

### The Politics of Camp

Sontag, writing in 1964, sees camp, with its rejection of morality, as "disengaged, depoliticized--or at least apolitical."<sup>15</sup>

Homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness.

In response Babuscio comments,

consistently followed as a comprehensive attitude, aestheticism inevitably leads to an ingrown selfishness in life, and to triviality in art. As a means to personal liberation through the exploration of experience, camp is an

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<sup>15</sup>Sontag

assertion of one's self-integrity--a temporary means of accomodation with society in which art becomes, at one and the same time, an intense mode of individualism and a form of spirited protest. And while camp advocates the dissolution of hard and inflexible moral rules, it pleads, too, for a morality of sympathy.<sup>16</sup>

And he argues, "...camp can be subversive--a means of illustrating those cultural ambiguities and contradictions that oppress us all, gay and straight, and in particular women."<sup>17</sup> Richard Dyer elaborates the point.

Not all gay camp is in fact progressive, but nonetheless it does have the potential for being so. What camp can do is demystify the images and world view of art and the media....Camp, by drawing attention to the artificies employed by artists, can constantly remind us that what we are seeing is only a view of life. This doesn't stop us enjoying it, but it does stop us believing too readily everything we are shown.<sup>18</sup>

We have to recognize the sex role stereotyping and misogyny that underpins some camp sensibility. Feminists have repeatedly pointed out that it's hardly liberating to simply reproduce with exaggeration the most hateful aspects of women's oppression and call it art. Pushed a little further, according to some critics, Water's films attain a dissociation of aesthetic response from human values. Writing in Boston's Gay

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<sup>16</sup>Babuscio

<sup>17</sup>Babuscio

<sup>18</sup>Dyer

Community News, Steve Blevins charged that the Waters' **Desparate Living**, was so deeply misogynist that it amounted to "the screen test for a 'snuff' film. To excuse it for reasons of art is to disguise one more instance of the oppression of women though media."<sup>19</sup>

Camp sensibility, like any particular subculture attitude in our society, operates within the larger boundaries of a racist, patriarchal, bourgeois culture. That it defines itself in difference from the dominant culture doesn't itself make camp appreciation or trash films a genuinely radical opposition. Camp and trash are potentially, not inherently, subversive. And it is the audience and their context which is necessary to complete that subversion. At some moments oppositionality occurs more obviously than others. Waters and Divine can end up rapidly recuperated into the existing system of sexist oppression. Divine's solo club act often included heavy doses of anti-woman humor.

In this perspective, **Thundercrack** came into existence at a peculiar historical juncture. It exhibited a full flowering of the filmic camp/trash sensibility established in the early 60s with Jack Smith's famous underground film **Flaming Creatures**, a film which became a cause celebre in breaking down reactionary censorship. At the same time, **Thundercrack** is a testament to the limited vision of male consciousness without the addition of a feminist understanding of society. McDowell and Kuchar, like Waters, often offer a sharp critique of dominant features of U.S. life, but they often come up short in having a fuller view

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<sup>19</sup>Blevins

of human existence. [add here or later disc. of later Waters and Kuchar, the forms of a fuller view.]

One important aspect of the discussion of sexism within camp, and by extension, in gay male culture has involved examining the adulation of certain female stars by gay men and the mixed and contradictory basis of camp love for Judy Garland, Barbra Streisand, Bette Davis, Bette Midler, Mae West, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Eartha Kitt, Carmen Miranda, Tallulah Bankhead, and Maria Montez. Michael Bronski argues that there is a positive and progressive aspect to this activity, particularly in the cases of Garland, Streisand, and Davis, in that it involves men admiring these women for the strength and resistance, their open expression of emotion, their living as outsiders in their roles as well as their public life. Yet he also identifies a deep misogyny in this adulation particularly with Miranda, Bankhead, and Montez: "...what does it mean for a large group of gay men to like a female performer expressly because of the fact that she is terrible?"<sup>20</sup>

If, following Freud, we say humor is always tendentious and always contains aggression, then we must ask what is the object of aggression in camp humor and what is being taught. And answer, not always but regrettably all too often, that women are the butt and the lesson is it's

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<sup>20</sup>Babuscio. . Babuscio seems to accept the idea that these performers are terrible, yet Miranda is certainly talented and witty within the very prescribed stereotypes she is given her film roles: she has remarkable aplomb and vigor in the situation. Assuming she and Montez are terrible may also involve a degree of racism toward these Latin women. Bankhead, whatever her performing ability, was notorious for her outspoken and unruly behavior, breaking the rules of feminine deportment. [fact check all this]

better to not really be one. As women know from experience, misogyny can form the mutual bonding of (gay and/or straight) men and serve as the pass to power and privilege. Feminists have been justly suspicious of gay male camp, and particularly of drag queens. The argument that drag ridicules female roles rather than women (an argument Babuscio comes close to making), quickly runs aground. As Dyer points out, in discussing Craig Russell's imperonations in **Outrageous!**:

...it is not the Judy Garland of **The Wizard of Oz** and **Meet Me in St. Louis** but of **A Star is Born** and the later period of her career as a stage performer, in which her body appeared, no doubt was, ravaged by pills, alcohol and marriages and she seemed to perform with all her nerve ends exposed. In other words, what Robin's/Russell's drag act predominantly constructs is an image of woman as neurotic. His women are resilient in their neurosis, and admirable for that, but this is till a bleak view of the destiny of femininity. If his women are "wonderful," they are also a mess.<sup>21</sup>

Dyer criticizes the repetition of the "masculine/feminine" gender opposition with the subordination of the later to the former and argues against a trend to masculinize gay male culture.

[add Dyer on Garland from Heavenly Bodies]

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<sup>21</sup>Dyer

At times the subversive potential of camp and trash can emerge as both ironic and sincere. Or perhaps I should say sincere because genuinely ironic, for true irony implies taking a stand in the face of a full knowledge of the matter at hand. In **Trash** Holly Woodlawn takes a class stand. Her insistence that she'll keep her silver shoes and still demand the state help support her child is marvelously ironic. And marvelously right. Our laughter is one of recognition, loving recognition.

Similarly, in some of his works, George Kuchar shows an ability to combine trash imagination with sincerity as in **I, An Actress** where the offscreen director, after coaching an unprepared actress for a role in what must be a Kuchar trash melodrama, takes center screen to show "how it should be done," in a scene of self-aware silliness. [fig] In **Mongrel**, a parody of the home movie and avant garde portrait film, Kuchar pushes the two genres' dominant code of sincerity to the absurd as he portrays his dog Bock and his own willingness to be foolish on screen. Giving Bock his favorite toys, Kuchar becomes All-American father to a disinterested dog: "I buy these things for you to make you happy!" And over grainy 8mm home movie footage he asks the pet, "We stopped in Salt Lake City. Do you remember, you made ca-ca in Salt Lake City?"

[conclude section, segue]

**politics of irony**



Irony can be thought of as a specific technique and also as a mode of discourse. As a technique, irony involves expressing a meaning contradictory to the stated or ostensible meaning. Many techniques can be used to achieve irony—sarcasm, understatement, overstatement, mockery, conscious naivete, etc. In our century, formalist criticism has elaborated in great detail the existence of and specific techniques of irony. Formalists have held that complexity, and ambiguity, are the key values in traditional and modern art. With modern art this is often linked to self-referentiality in the text. In a related argument, Northrup Frye has discussed irony as a mode of discourse and the mode most typical of literature in the past 100 years. As Frye describes ironic narration:

If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration or absurdity, the hero belongs to the ironic mode. This is still true when the reader feels that he [sic] is or might be in the same situation, as the situation is being judged by the norms of a greater freedom...

Kafka, Joyce, Beckwith, Dostoevski, Strindberg and many more provide good examples of Frye's ironic mode.

The argument to this point.

a. Kitsch/Mass Culture is based (in large part) on an existing culture and turns it into a system, an industrially producible, reproducible, form.

- b. Today mass culture recirculates itself. The existing culture it is turning into a system today includes within it previous mass culture. Thus it is by its very nature self-reflexive: as seen in everything from IBM ads which recirculate the image of Charlie Chaplin to genre changes in the western and detective narrative, to MTV's relentless recirculation of images from earlier eras and style figures from the past.
- c. Camp and trash draws on and somewhat transforms mass culture.
- d. In this it critiques a part of the dominant culture, but usually in the dominant culture's own terms. It seldom rests on any coherent or sustained analysis of culture and history.
- e. Camp and trash use irony as a technique, but more importantly as a general mode of discourse. As a mode of discourse, irony is ideological (within the dominant ideology)

[explain here, or elsewhere?, the ironic mode of narration as modernism, its connection with the rise of aestheticism, aestheticism's relation to naturalism, and the development of the dandy as a social position within the petty bourgeoisie]

Radical criticism has taken three different positions with regard to the politics of irony: as inherently reactionary, as inherently progressive, and as simply a condition of contemporary art and cultural production.

Those who argue that irony is inherently regressive usually do so on an openly political basis, be that conservative or radical. In its most general form, the radical argument goes like this: irony separates form from content and then validates that separation (a violation of organic unity) and then validates form as more important than content (formalism). It is then a species of aestheticism, or art for art's sake, of the divorce of human values from the art experience and considering art as only a matter of internal form, separated from ordinary life, from the spectator. And it is tied to creating a subject-text relationship that is essentially a training in alienated experience. Essentially all calls for a return to realism repeat this argument. [eg in film Robin Wood, Irwin Silber, etc.]

One version of this argument claims that the working class cannot understand irony as a technique, an argument which cannot hold up if we simply look at comic irony in popular culture and everyday messages. Notice how such marxists never mention children's nursery rhymes and nonsense language play as part of art production and ordinary people's imagination. Another version of this argument says that the working class cannot relate to irony as a narrative mode (in Frye's sense). As Barbara Kessel discovered in teaching literature to working class community college students,

As for Sisyphus, or one version of civilized man, the students, be they black or white, cannot agree less with the dictum that "there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn." Many teachers who live with themselves as failures

surmount it by scorn of their students, if not for the whole human race--a common fruit of the liberal world-view. But nonelite students are seldom liberals and they face rocks to push that are not mental or psychological, but physical, and the confrontation between them and the possibility of futility in their labors cannot be transcended ("Do you mean that my parents spent their lives in their crummy jobs and saved their money so that I could go to college and I am still not going to do any better? Do you mean that people can try as hard as they can and still not make it in America?") A life of alienated labor is not transcended by scorn, because there is no way of feeling superior to that fate--only intellectuals can feel superior to a condition of powerlessness and manipulation. Sometimes that strategy breaks down for them too.<sup>22</sup>

The contrary argument, that irony is inherently progressive, rests on the assumption that irony is part of the modern consciousness, and that modernist ironic art creates an "open form" which allows for a complex experience. The text then becomes "open" or "free" and this produces a liberating effect on the audience. (Though we might remember that freedom can only be taken, not given.) Correlative with this is a celebration of the freedom of detachment (sometimes erroneously confused with the critical distance of Brechtian alienation), of an indeterminate floating, as in Barthes. This celebration of indecision, of not taking

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<sup>22</sup>Kessel in Kampf and Lauter, *Politics of Literature*

sides, of not having to decide which side you're on, reflects the class position of the petty bourgeoisie. Its genius after all, its survival, is in working with both major classes; it floats so it doesn't have to appear to be taking sides (yet to float without taking sides in a power struggle is to side with the more powerful).

While Barthes, in his most appealing work, as in the essay on writers, teachers and intellectuals, urges ambiguity and floating (he makes the explicit comparison to being stoned on marijuana) as a way of foreclosing a rapid reductionism, this same call which in Barthes seems like an attempt to interrupt the too certain and too rational project of French intellectual life, becomes in later thinkers of 70s France, and their followers, simply an excuse for maintaining privilege through the refusal of any totalizing thought, scorning any commitment as imperfect, and achieving an arrogant level of intellectual self-pity.

lets name names - at best Foucault  
at worst Duchilland  
Sollers  
Kristeva

Yet the ability to foreground technique, style, form, execution, etc. and to see those elements apart from the ensemble of relations (internally and externally--aesthetically and socially) is first of all a necessary working condition in the arts and media. Indeed, it is part of the enabling act of art-making--that the maker be able to change, adjust, modify, to judge the work in progress and change it. In that sense there is a connection between the development of oil painting in the Renaissance, the medium of representational painting par excellence for continuous modification, and Hollywood's internal studio reports on dailies (the previous 24 hours of footage shot in production) and accounting breakdowns of studio production. Of course in industrial production of culture many of the

tasks are subdivided among specialists, each of whom knows how to work to the dominant norm. We must also account for the basic feature of contemporary arts that the audience does understand irony and always has the capacity to, on its own, adopt irony as a stance to the work. At the same time, this knowledge differs in its actual social use between those who use it defensively (as audience) and whose use is intended to refuse, diffuse, and break down the assault on them (most easily done when distance can be obtained by a relatively simple separation, which is why the formulaic quality of much mass culture lends itself so well to this kind of ironic undertaking), and those who use it as a means of control, domination, that is those who by profession, temper, etc. are able to maintain irony. Barthes is right to argue against authority and for complexity. But in arguing for irony and indeterminacy he finally argues against practice, commitment, risk, testing the idea. Freedom does not lie in not having to decide. In fact, in reality, in lived experience, in everyday life, history forces decisions on us. The question of freedom is the political and existential one of what decision one makes--of which side you're on.

A third radical position on irony, and my own, is that irony is inherent in contemporary art. Both high culture forms and mass culture forms today are heavily ironic. Art is never univocal, it operates in the zone of overcoding and undercoding (eco), and it always gets different responses from different people. Kessel is only half right when she says the situation of powerlessness is not ironic to those who suffer it, for one of the ways that the oppressed have dealt with that situation is by

themselves being ironic about it, by making jokes about it, and in a way which is protective and tendentious.

We can take the example of the cakewalk, a processional dance that was originated in the ante-bellum plantation south of the US. It was a show arranged for the entertainment of the white masters. The black slaves were given cast-off clothing, finery unsuitable for their ordinary labor, and thus dressed up they proceeded to parade (often with a cake as the prize, thus the term). For the masters there was considerable amusement in seeing the slaves in this totally "inappropriate" clothing and their extreme gestures acting as if they had the refined manners of the aristocrats. Yet for the slaves, as hateful as this scorn might have been, for those who participated, it was also an opportunity to mock the manners of the masters. After the Civil War the cakewalk continued in various forms, including the minstrel and vaudeville show, and from the visual evidence we have 40 years later, in some of the first silent films, we can see that the blacks were ironically mocking the fancy manners of the whites in a comic form which safely contained (but certainly did not eliminate) the criticism. [fig] Whites remained amused and superior, blacks could spot the ridicule involved. Everyone laughed, but one side's laughter was different than the other's. [fact check this with Susan Lee against dance hist, etc.]

Irony is not in the work, it is a stance people take toward art. All works can be regarded ironically; some works invite an ironic stance.

Irony is persistent under conditions of advanced capitalism. Irony stands as a means of accommodation to things that people think they cannot change. In that sense it is adaptive (and there is a partial truth in the Marxist suspicion of it). But once people sense that history is changing and they can change things around them, irony is different. It becomes deep and cutting against the past, against the status quo, against what holds people back. [quote Gil Scott Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised"] And in terms of the rest of life, it softens and becomes much diffused. It begins to function in art to indicate richness, diversity, possibility, the future, precisely because it seems a whole culture can be transformed. It <sup>explains</sup> sets up the opportunity to make new connections. This is what at its best the counterculture was able to do in the 60s, it is what is marked in Jimi Hendrix's version of the Star Spangled Banner, taking over something totally identified with the dominant culture and magically transforming it into something that said to youth culture, not "patriotism" but "we have a right to this too," and we can take it over and transform it to our own ends using our own unique tools and talents.

Such an irony is not the dry high irony of Yvonne Rainer or the Mulvey/Wollen films, but imbued with a greater sense of the range of life and human possibilities, with an awareness of the grotesque, of carnival, of anger, of sensuality, etc. There is a joyous richness in work such as Medvedkin's **Happiness**, Birri's **My Son Che**, etc. We need that richness, that fullness, that sense of life's possibilities if we are to create a truly popular radical culture.

adds



Rosa Von Praunheim

Warrington Hudlin, Street Corner Stories

major section of the work in progress, may be quoted if citation includes status as work in progress and date of composition

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*This whole section, "marginalizing  
the document," seems  
the most interesting to me. Dense,  
new theoretical ground, good  
examples.*